

Tuesday, April 7, 2009

BRAC road projects could cost more than \$200M

Estimates far exceed available funding

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer

This story was corrected 1 p.m. April 7, 2009.

Contemplating the prospect of having her house purchased to make way for intersection improvements related to BRAC at Connecticut Avenue and Jones Bridge Road, Denise Kondilis said she didn't want to uproot her kids from their schools, but also appeared fatalistic about the state-run projects.

"They're going to do what they want to do regardless of what people say," said Kondilis, a 20-year resident of the 8900 block of Connecticut Avenue, whose property could be purchased by the state to add through and turn lanes at the intersection. Four other properties on Connecticut Avenue could be similarly affected by the projects.

Residents at a Thursday night project forum at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School found much to criticize, as the state revealed cost estimates for the work far beyond its currently available funding.

The four projects are designed to ease increased traffic caused by Base Realignment and Closure plan, which will move the Walter Reed Army Medical Center from its current location in Washington, D.C. to the campus of the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda.

The intersection projects would cost a minimum of \$160 million, according to estimates from the State Highway Association. The maximum estimated cost is \$215 million. There are currently \$36 million available in funds for the project, including state and federal earmarks.

The most expensive project would be improvements to the intersection of Rockville Pike and Cedar Lane, which are estimated to cost \$100 million to \$125 million. Upgrades there would include a new through lane northbound and another southbound, new turn lanes eastbound and westbound, and a new left-hand turn lane northbound on the Pike into the NIH commercial vehicle inspection facility, south of the intersection.

The least expensive would be upgrades to Old Georgetown Road and West Cedar Lane, which ranges in estimated cost from \$10 million to \$15 million. The other two intersections scheduled for improvement are Rockville Pike and Jones Bridge Road, and West Cedar Lane and Old Georgetown Road.

Previously, SHA officials had revealed that the combined project costs would be at least twice the available funding, and that not all of the proposed work could be completed by the opening of the new Walter Reed facility in September 2011. Construction on the chosen improvements is scheduled to begin in the summer or fall of next year.

Andy Scott, special assistant for economic development to State Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari, said it was still tough to gauge "what the priorities are" and that SHA would continue to seek public input. SHA has not yet decided on which projects to spend the \$36 million.

The intersections are only expected to see small improvements in efficiency with the new traffic from BRAC after the projects are completed. SHA has said the projects are not intended as long-term solutions.

Hundreds of people attended Thursday's informal presentation of the intersection improvements and talked to SHA officials on hand. Many offered critical comments, although a few said the state was doing all it could in a difficult situation.

Theodore Goldstock, an Elmhurst Lane resident who lives near the intersection of Rockville Pike and Cedar Lane, said the preliminary plans did not make the necessary improvements for pedestrian safety and would only solve part of the traffic problems.

"I don't think they're addressing the corridor," Goldstock said. "I think they're only addressing two points on the corridor."

Angela Atwood-Moore, president of the Bicycle Commuter Club at the National Institutes of Health, sharply criticized SHA for not promoting bike infrastructure as a way to reduce the number of cars on the road.

"You can't do that by making it easier for people to drive their cars," said Atwood-Moore.

County Councilman Roger Berliner also stressed the need to weigh the cost and local impacts of the projects against their effectiveness.

"At this price, maybe other options come into play, maybe longer-term options come into play," said Berliner (D-Dist.1) of Potomac. He suggested a new rapid bus system from White Flint to downtown Bethesda as one solution.

Bethesda resident John Sogn, however, said the SHA's proposals represented a good effort.

"I think they've done fundamentally a good job," he said.

To learn more

The State Highway Administration is planning improvements to four intersections near the National Naval Medical Center. Visual representations of the projects are available at http://www.mdot.state.md.us/Planning/brac/BNNMC_Workshop_Displays